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Hydrogen Fuel Cells: A Pathway to Clean Energy

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ABSTRACT

As the global demand for clean, efficient, and sustainable energy intensifies, hydrogen fuel cells (HFCs) have emerged as a promising technology capable of transforming the energy landscape. This paper provides a comprehensive overview of hydrogen fuel cells, from their historical development and fundamental operating principles to current production methods, storage solutions, and market applications. It highlights the advantages of HFCs including high efficiency, modularity, and zero emissions and explores their diverse applications across sectors such as transportation, power generation, and industry. Additionally, the paper addresses environmental and economic implications, outlining both the opportunities and the challenges that shape the future of hydrogen energy. Emphasis is placed on the role of policy, innovation, and investment in overcoming technological and infrastructural barriers to make hydrogen fuel cells a cornerstone of the global clean energy strategy.

Keywords: Hydrogen fuel cells; clean energy; renewable energy; sustainable development; electrolysis; green hydrogen; fuel cell vehicles (FCVs).

INTRODUCTION

The world is currently undergoing an unprecedented energy transition, driven initially by fossil fuel depletion and the irreversible damage of climate change, but founded on the patenting and emerging green technologies. A very wide range of conventional energy generation technologies exists, but a small number of new, scalable technologies can be patented and commercialized as the “next generation,” blockbuster energy technologies with mass market application. These technologies include among others indirect solar energy storage in the “solar black hole” concept, compressing warm seawater, and producing hydrogen. Hydrogen in energy science is a “vector” resource (similar to the term in telecommunications) which is required for energy storage, transport, generation, and usage. It can be utilized as a zero-emission combustible or fuel, passed to fuels cells to produce clean energy at point-of-use in either electric form in transport or heat form in biohydrogenation, hydrodeoxygenation, or other high-density anode catalyst processes in refineries. Massive future commercial applications require low costs and availability of H₂ as well as commercial fuel cells which can accept it. The enormous current prediction for H₂ usage requires major attention in research and industry and the emergence of vertical or horizontal integration of companies for optimum production-to-patenting chains. Globally, mega-scale H₂ consumption aggregating thousands of tons of daily usage already exists in petrochemical, refining, and ammonia production processes as well as newly emerging processes driven by self-sufficient energy. There are many emerging industries manufacturing modular large-scale alkaline electrolyzers with mega-watt base power integrated with huge offshore wind farms. However, for commercialization, the

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option of using smaller-scale commercial alkaline units fed with on-site produced via electrolysis H₂ must also arise [1, 2].

Historical Development of Fuel Cells

The story of fuel cells is a fascinating one, entailing elegance to design. Various fuel cell systems are being developed for power generation, as these devices offer many advantages over conventional technologies: an environmentally friendly profile, high efficiency, low emissions, solid-state appportionment that leads to lower maintenance needs, high reliability, silent operation, and modularity. Fuel cells were first conceived in 1839 by Sir William Grove. He hypothesized that when excess power was provided to a cell containing sulfuric acid and platinum electrodes, a large amount of power would be produced. He was subsequently successful in demonstrating the principle. The earliest working fuel cell prototype was a hydrogen/oxygen stationary fuel cell developed by Sir William Grove; this extraordinary design was able to produce a small amount of power efficiently. While God's toy was indeed elegant, the approach failed to produce the large amounts of power needed for commercial applications. After Grove's work, little was done until the state of Maryland funded Robert K. Wehry, who continued to develop a hydrogen/oxygen cell. Finally, in 1932, Henry G. J. Brown developed a phosphoric acid fuel cell with the help of Walter H. Haggerty at Union Carbide. The J. P. Morgan Company financed Brown's efforts to produce fuel cells and sent researchers to work in Ohio. In 1961, J. P. Morgan and the United States government formed a partnership to reduce the costs of fuel cells for practical applications. That was the genesis of today's commercial offer for fuel cells when NASA developed a tremendous amount of petrochemical alloy catalysts. A fuel cell demonstration aboard Gemini 10 produced 14.5 kW of power from a 337 lb system. NASA subsequently demonstrated the technology in several of the early Apollo spacecraft [3, 4].

Basic Principles of Hydrogen Fuel Cells

Hydrogen Fuel Cells (HFCs) are power generation devices that convert chemical energy directly into electrical energy, providing an environmentally friendly alternative to fossil energy. As a zero-emission technology, they form part of the United Nations (UN) strategy for sustainable development and are expected to play a major role in future energy plans, acting as a safe energy carrier of renewable sources. Almost any material containing H₂ can be converted into electrical energy by HFCs produced by electrochemical reactions. HFCs offer virtually zero emissions (apart from water), not only when using hydrogen but also when methane (CH₄) is the main fuel, in which case their products are harmless. H₂ can be produced from various sources and in various ways. Chlorine is produced in large quantities from brines, and it can be used to obtain H₂. Apart from these available sources of H₂, there is also research on its alternative production from renewable energy use, through biomass processing, photocatalysis, thermochemical cycles, and anaerobic digestion systems. HFCs can also use such sustainable HFCs with a zero-emission energy supply. HFC systems are modular. According to their operation in vehicle or stationary applications, they can have either small size and power (a few kW) or large (multi-MW) power suitable for grid or network integration. Almost 450 HFC-powered cars and buses currently operate in daily revenue services. HMFC systems have a lot of other advantages, such as low noise and vibration, high power density (up to 10 kW/L), high efficiency (54-65%), and fast refueling (3-10 min). The mission of the current world renewable energy strategy is, first, the carbon-free electrification of the current economy sectors (power, transportation, and buildings) by the introduction of weightless and less expensive renewable energy storage technologies [5, 6].

Types of Hydrogen Fuel Cells

There are several basic types of hydrogen fuel cells in operation today, as well as several hybrid systems. Hydrogen fuel cells employ an oxidizing agent that is either a pure gas or a gaseous mixture containing the required oxidation component. Either a gas-burning or a combination of gas-burning and diesel engines can serve as the energy source in internal combustion engines. In addition, any one of the various water-jacketed or air-cooled reciprocating diesel or gasoline engines could serve as energy sources for combined-cycle gas conversions. Hydrogen fuel cells are akin to batteries in that power is obtained from an electrochemical reaction in a cell, unlike internal combustion engines that convert chemical energy to mechanical energy via an imperfect combustion process. Because the reactants of hydrogen fuel cells are gaseous and mixtures, the cells generally consist of lattices of porous matrices soaked with an electrolyte solution and a catalyst. There are employed either bipolar plate modules or tubular systems, the latter of which are primarily for space applications. The evolution of electric energy in passively operated

hydrogen fuel cells is limited to 300 millivolts at ambient temperature. Hence, for practical applications, a substantial electrical load on the fuel cell is required to develop power. In this mode, hydrogen fuel cells are bifacial batteries consisting of a cathode, a plate of superconducting conductive material, and a plastic gold-plated base plate laminated on the anode side. With continuous cleansing of the cathode surface, noble-metal electrodes passivated with a monolayer of adsorbed sulfur or other damaging substances may continue to function like clean hydrogen fuel cells by an indirect cyclization of hydrogen trapped on the cathode macrocaps in localized zones devoid of cathodic and a monocatalytic region. In this way, the H₂-plated anodic surface continues in full-scale active operation. Such fuel cells are potentially of great importance because, in large power applications on land and in space, they are capable of running passively continuously for years [7, 8].

Hydrogen Production Methods

In recent decades, rising atmospheric pollution and environmental concerns have driven the search for clean energy solutions, with hydrogen emerging as an ideal fuel. It generates only water vapor when burned and releases significant energy. Hydrogen can be utilized in fuel cells, internal combustion engines, and as a raw material, without emitting noxious substances. Despite its benefits, hydrogen storage is challenging; a combustion reaction is needed for energy production. Thus, finding effective hydrogen production methods is key to clean energy technologies. Various processes have been developed, such as chemical reforming, which generates "grey" and "blue hydrogen" from fossil fuels, and organic waste-based methods that emit no carbon dioxide but require large equipment. "Green hydrogen" is produced via electrolysis, photolysis, or biohydrogen fermentation, though these novel processes are costly. The search continues for simpler, cost-effective methods for the mass production of ultra-pure hydrogen. Currently, no technical standard for hydrogen production has been established. Hydrogen production technologies are primarily categorized into chemical reforming, biological production, and water electrolysis. Chemical reforming, involving high-temperature reforming or partial oxidation, utilizes natural gas, fossil gas, or methanol as raw materials, accounting for over 85% of current hydrogen production. The reforming process yields hydrogen, useful CO₂, and CO as byproducts. "Grey hydrogen" results when only chemical reforming is used, creating 70–90% hydrogen and substantial CO₂, contributing to greenhouse gas effects. Water, composed of hydrogen and oxygen, is a plentiful source of hydrogen. When provided sufficient energy, its molecules split into hydrogen and oxygen. The challenge lies in overcoming the dipole momentum of water molecules, requiring external energy, such as electromagnetic waves, to generate the high temperatures needed for efficient splitting. Understanding how to minimize the initial water volume and the barriers present during splitting is essential [9, 10].

Storage and Distribution of Hydrogen

Hydrogen is a promising clean energy carrier and can be produced through diverse feedstocks and processes. Currently, hydrogen production is dominated by coal gasification and natural gas reforming, which are the most cost-effective and highly available methods. These techniques are well established in the industry, with a hydrogen production capacity of more than 70 billion cubic meters and more than 20 million tons per year for coal and natural gas methods, respectively. However, both processes produce great quantities of CO₂, and therefore, they are not viable options for a future sustainable hydrogen supply. Environmental depletion and climate change considerations will encourage the development of hydrogen production techniques based on renewable resources, including water, sunlight, and biomass. Depending on the feedstock, hydrogen production techniques can be grouped into conventional and emerging processes. Biogas reforming, a methane-based hydrogen production process, may be an attractive choice for specific geographical regions and applications. Apart from CO₂ emissions, CO and sulfur impurities also need to be eliminated from the product before use in fuel cells or other applications. At the same time, hydrogen has found a rapidly expanding market in fuel cells, petroleum refining, ammonia and methanol production, and chemical hydrogenation. Hydrogen can be produced commercially from a variety of resources, and many methods for plausible energy feedstocks other than fossil fuels are under development and demonstration. Some techniques are based on thermal processes generating high temperature steam, some others involve catalytic breakdown of methane, or even biological pathways. Oil and natural gas, which have had a good price on the open market despite approaching depletion, are used predominantly to generate hydrogen in large quantities. This situation will change under greenhouse gas mitigation constraints [11, 12].

Applications of Hydrogen Fuel Cells

Fuel cells can provide electricity, heat, and themselves, thus replacing batteries in many applications. In passenger vehicles, small fuel cell electric vehicles and internal combustion engine hydrogen vehicles are expected to coexist for several years. In the medium- and heavy-duty vehicle segment, hydrogen fuel cells should find significant applications in buses, trucks, and trains. Even bigger applications in ships, aircraft, construction, and farming are being developed. With appropriate support policies and efforts to close the price gap with battery electric vehicles, FCEV sales could surpass those of battery electric vehicles in the 2030s in mid and large segments. Automotive applications of fuel cells can be divided into two main categories: mobility and stationary. Mobility applications include passenger cars and light-duty vehicles (LDVs), as well as heavy-duty vehicles (HDVs), like trucks, buses, locomotives, ships, and drones, and so on. Fuel cell vehicles (FCVs) have been demonstrated as an alternative to plug-in hybrid vehicles (PHEVs) and battery-electric vehicles (BEVs), both in the commercial and pilot stages. An interesting application in the automotive sector is the hydrogen/fuel cell locomotive. Battery electric locomotives intended for medium-range services are constrained by minimal station spacing and available charging infrastructure. For this reason, some manufacturers have proposed hydrogen or hydrocarbon fuel cells as range extenders. The main attraction of Q-Comp's Q-Drive® technology is that it can be used in the focus industries for SDOS; in other words, the technology is Memphisagnose-wide, stationary, not requiring regional manipulation of hydrogen, does not rely on municipalities, and may offer self-sustainability possibilities. In addition, being maintenance-light is a clear commercial advantage over competitors. However, Q-Comp should continue to follow recommendations for the public announcement and demo of pilot prototypes of technology to attract public attention [13, 14].

Environmental Impact of Hydrogen Fuel Cells

Hydrogen fuel cells, like any other energy conversion technology, have both advantages and disadvantages. It is imperative to recognize both environmental benefits and detriments before understanding the feasibility of hydrogen energy as a nationwide solution. Well-to-wheels analysis of the concept of hydrogen vehicles and hydrogen fuel cell-driven buses indicates the general feasibility of the concept, albeit with a few disadvantages, having remedy-based technology. The structural possibility has also been reported for the Indian cities based on the local conditions, like available raw materials and pressure service. With the vision of 2031, planners must initiate a feasibility study including infrastructure development, a domestic hydrogen production system, transportation patterns, and application scenarios. The status of hydrogen energy supply pathways is analyzed in terms of local environmental benefits and costs involved. Benefits from hydrogen supply with reforming of fossil fuels as well as electrolysis of water when powered with renewables-based electricity are obtained, as well as contributions from hydrogen storage and transportation to nationally and locally economically feasible application routes. India seems to be on the path of hydrogen; it must now take the necessary steps to walk down. The report suggests actions India must consider to meet the long-standing dreams of a possible national hydrogen economy. With increased concern about global warming and air quality, there is a need to investigate options to encourage the transition to a hydrogen economy in the near term. Hydrogen can be produced from diverse sources and feedstocks having strategic importance in their availability, pricing, and ease of production. Land, water, and energy requirements of hydrogen energy supply pathways, when accounted are insignificant compared to fossil fuel alternatives. This is even more apparent when the local and global environmental benefits from hydrogen pathways are considered. For many applications, like power production in distributed systems, hydrogen fuel cell usage seems valid in a lifetime cost perspective. With large-scale implementation costs that would reduce significantly, undertaking a transition on investment costs now for any country sounds comparatively more valid, sustainable than will later be obligatory transition in the battle for survival [15, 16].

Economic Factors and Market Potential

The economic dimensions of fuel cells and hydrogen are substantial. Once past the capital aggression of securing sustainably sourced hydrogen and hydrogen transportation infrastructure, fuel cells continue to become less costly. A significant advantage of fuel cells is that, compared with batteries, most components are a generic technology. Fuel cells are durable and low-maintenance technologies that mostly use simple-to-manufacture, extremely low-cost, and low-hazard materials. Largely a result of its simplicity of manufacturing, fuel cells require manufacturing capital intensity comparable to modern lithium-ion batteries. Capital intensity requirements for electrolyzers, on the other hand, are much larger—this is also

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an obstacle to the production of high-purity, renewable hydrogen. Hydrogen fuel costs will fall 66 percent by 2050, and fuel cell technology will become much more competitive than diesel. With fuel cells, fresh hydrogen is injected into the anode side of the stack where the reaction occurs. There, it is converted to hydrogen ions and electrons. The electrons create a higher voltage potential, and an electric current is directed to the desired outlet. The hydrogen ions diffuse to the cathode side of the stack via the polymer electrolyte membrane that is impermeable to electrons. The hydrogen ions recombine with oxygen and electrons to form water. The basic unit of the fuel cell is a membrane electrode assembly, a thin polymer film sandwiched between two electrodes and attached to current-collecting plates. Optionally, metal porous flow field plates can be used to facilitate water management. Nanocatalysts are used at the electrodes to generate and reduce free radicals [17, 18].

Challenges Facing Hydrogen Fuel Cells

Interpretation of hydrogen energy systems indicates a classification of hydrogen production methods. Key global development activities regarding hydrogen production, storage, transportation, and utilization are examined. The emphasis is placed on shifting research towards applying hydrogen energy systems. Major advancements in fuel cell technology, encompassing on-board, stationary, and large-scale applications, are also introduced. Existing issues within the hydrogen energy landscape are identified, accompanied by suggestions. As a clean, renewable energy source, hydrogen garners global interest, particularly for its potential in the transport sector, which contributes significantly to pollution. While policies aimed at reducing vehicular emissions have been implemented, the growing number of restricted areas in cities has hindered progress. Traditional vehicles continue to emit pollutants, exacerbating environmental issues. Hence, transitioning to clean energy vehicles, such as those powered by fuel cells, is essential. Fuel cells, as electrochemical devices, convert hydrogen and oxygen into water and heat, progressively replacing internal combustion engines in transportation. An overview of fuel cell hydrogen electric vehicles, including operation principles, storage systems, and public acceptance, is provided, alongside identification of major challenges ahead [19, 20].

Future of Hydrogen Fuel Cells

The world's energy market is primarily reliant on oil, gas, and coal, which constitute 94% of total consumption. By 2030, fossil fuel depletion may lead to conflicts over supplies, while climate predictions forecast catastrophic temperature increases that threaten the planet. These alarming forecasts have spurred political unrest and significant investments in research for zero-emission energy solutions that preserve Earth's resources. Hydrogen energy fits these requirements, being the most expensive energy transfer medium today, but its benefits justify the cost. Fuel cells, still in developmental stages rather than industrialized technology, face challenges such as high electricity production costs and hydrogen sourcing from methane reforming, which emits CO₂. Solid oxide fuel cells (SOFCs) operate at high temperatures with low power density, unsuitable for mobile uses without costly thermal coatings. Therefore, substantial cost reductions are essential for commercialization. Proton-exchange membrane fuel cells (PEMFCs) are better suited for vehicles and portable applications but struggle with durability due to platinum particle agglomeration and catalyst layer instability. To advance fuel cell commercialization, three main challenges must be addressed: durability, performance, and cost, with durability being the most critical. International cooperation and scientific innovation are vital for achieving sufficient lifespan goals. Additionally, producing clean hydrogen, ensuring safe and economical transportation and storage at high pressures in robust containers, presents significant hurdles. Ongoing global research aims to effectively resolve these issues in both traditional methane reforming and emerging hydrogen production methods [21, 22].

Case Studies of Hydrogen Fuel Cell Implementation

The critical role of hydrogen and fuel cell technologies in decarbonising and leading transport systems towards a sustainable energy future was outlined in a report. Four priority transport sectors were identified: hydrogen and fuel cell (HFC) priority infrastructure and transition grants (HG); hydrogen production in electrolyser terminals (P); hydrogen refueling stations (HRS) (F); hydrogen technology priority innovations (TI). The COVID-19 pandemic challenged and delayed hydrogen technology and corresponding transport sector developments, but the hydrogen transition can support a better renewal of economic growth, cementing Europe's leading position in the hydrogen technology sector, deploying a clean hydrogen economy, and resulting in cleaner air and lower transport emissions. The four H2FC priority areas were updated to reflect developments from 2020-2021, outcomes from H2FC workshops,

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and suggestions from H2FC stakeholders. An overview of hydrogen production technologies was presented. Hydrogen could be produced from a wide range of domestic hydrocarbon sources, but natural gas is the primary source of hydrogen production today, creating significant carbon emissions. Several fossil hydrogen production methods have been tested or commercially deployed. Hydrogen production from fossil sources will remain important in the future. Pathways for low-carbon hydrogen from fossil sources (or even subsequently from biomass) were proposed. Ultimately, hydrogen production should be from renewable or surplus electricity and electrolysis technologies, making use of the permanently available and relatively inexpensive water resources. This pathway entails significantly higher costs than that using fossil or nuclear sources, but a thorough benchmarking of the costs of fossil, nuclear, and renewable hydrogen production alternatives was presented. Nevertheless, an increasing number of countries have actively launched government policies, R&D programs, and commercialization plans for the introduction of hydrogen production and fuel cell deployments in transportation and distributed power generation applications [23, 24].

CONCLUSION

Hydrogen fuel cells represent a critical component in the global pursuit of a carbon-neutral and sustainable energy system. With their capacity to convert chemical energy into electricity cleanly and efficiently, HFCs offer a viable solution to the limitations of fossil fuels. Their versatility across transportation, industrial, and residential sectors makes them a key enabler of decarbonization. Despite challenges related to hydrogen production, storage, infrastructure, and cost, ongoing technological advancements and supportive policies are accelerating their commercialization. As nations strive to meet climate goals and energy demands, investment in hydrogen fuel cells, along with integrated green hydrogen production, will play a pivotal role in shaping a resilient, low-carbon future. Ultimately, the successful adoption of hydrogen fuel cells will depend not only on technological breakthroughs but also on a cohesive global strategy that fosters innovation, affordability, and accessibility.

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